

Seattle Light Rail Review Panel

Meeting Notes for May 16, 2001

Agenda Items

- Status Update and General Discussion on MLK Corridor and Southeast Seattle Link Stations

Commissioners Present

Rick Sundberg, Chair
Matthew Kitchen
Carolyn Law
Don Royse
Paul Tomita

Staff Present

Debora Ashland, Sound Transit
Cheryl Sizov, CityDesign

Rick Sundberg began the meeting with introductions of all present. Cheryl Sizov reviewed the agenda and meeting objectives, noting that this meeting is organized differently than usual, with a focus on group discussion of the key remaining issues in the MLK Corridor and Southeast Seattle with respect to light rail. She referred everyone to a set of handouts including a summary of all LRRP recommendations to date on the Corridor and Southeast stations, and a recap of progress made to date on all aspects of design, station area planning, and related work.

Susanne Friedman invited the Panel to a working session of the Planning Commission Transportation Committee on Thursday, May 24th from 9:15 to 10:30 am to discuss the SEIS recently published on Northgate Link. Debora Ashland talked about the Sound Transit Board meeting schedule, noting that on May 24th there will be an informational session, followed by a decision on June 14th as to which portion of Link to proceed with first. Until then, staff is proceeding under the existing schedule.

MLK Corridor: Discussion of Outstanding Issues

Cheryl presented a brief overview of progress made to date before Rick opened up the discussion of key issues. Stephen Antupit requested that we add Cheasty/Winthrop Street as a key issue under McClellan station. Katherine Claeys and Amy Glenn added that the City is working hard to agree on a desired footprint for the station, along with related access improvements, in order to give consistent direction to Sound Transit. Rick suggested that the discussion begin with landscaping, particularly the issue of trees and how to resolve differences of opinion about where they should be placed. Comments from Panel members, City, and Sound Transit staff are summarized below:

- As a point of clarification, note that the photos of San Jose are not analogous to the Seattle system because theirs is a streetcar system with 15-20 minute headways and much lower volumes, whereas Seattle's system is actually more than "light rail" with shorter headways and projected for up to 150,000 passengers daily in 2020. We also have 1500 volts and San Jose's is probably 750 volt. This is not an apples-to-apples comparison.
- And how does all that impact landscaping?
- Higher voltage requires greater distance between overhead catenary wires and anything else, such as tree branches, and the system has to be shut down for maintenance.
- No one would argue that CalTrans isn't more attractive, but from these photos it looks like San Jose would be violating the health and safety regulations in the Washington code if they were here with that system.

- At what point in the process did we, as a region, make the decision to go with higher voltage, and why?
- In 1998. While 750 volts is common in the U.S., you often see higher voltage, 1500 volts, elsewhere. 1500 volts is cheaper to build. It would have cost \$17 million more to use 750 volts. So it is a trade-off between higher voltage and fewer (or smaller) trees.
- The San Jose system is also running more slowly than Seattle's will—we'll be at 35 miles per hour. Another reason why trees can be problematic near the track—leaves can settle and mat on the tracks, making it difficult for the train to brake. With a ballast system like San Jose's, the leaves end up on the ballast and not on the tracks themselves.
- I have a hard time visualizing the matting of leaves on the tracks; wouldn't the regular running of the trains and the friction of the wheels on the track tend to disperse and/or break down the leaf mass?
- Portland has to clean their tracks manually each day.
- The emphasis is on trees, and rightly so. It is very important to have trees along this corridor, and hopefully we are talking about hundreds of them along the MLK Corridor within the planting strips. And possibly only a few in the gore areas or at stations. We can overcome some of the concerns through appropriate selection of tree species. With respect to line clearance, how different are the light rail regulations from those that govern line workers who work for City Light? The City requires workers who prune around electrical wires to be certified as line clearance staff.
- Wayfinding is an issue at stations too with the ADA community. They are supporting our use of the "braid" as a textured element running parallel to the train. Having trees, and tree pits, on the platform could interfere with an impaired person following the braid. This is a liability issue and therefore a design consideration. In Pittsburgh recently, someone died crossing a trackway, and transportation staff were involved in a lawsuit.
- The liability issue has come up before. A few years ago people were urging the School District to take out all shrubs near the school buildings where a person could possibly hide. There comes a point, though, where the trade-offs are greater than the benefits.
- It seems that each of these issues is legitimate individually, and yet collectively they add up to a poor design for the MLK Corridor. The City and Sound Transit have reasonable concerns, but unfortunately addressing these concerns means, in some cases, eliminating all opportunity for landscaping because the locations where Sound Transit is comfortable having landscaping are not places where the City wants it—and vice versa.
- Landscaping is critically important to the success of this Corridor, so where are the priorities? I disagree, personally, that the platform itself is a priority. The challenge is in making the whole corridor urban with high quality features. Trees on the platforms are not the only opportunities to make that happen. We need to face the challenges here and reach some kind of compromise.
- The impression I was left with after the staff session on landscaping, is that many of the locations are just large enough for 2 to 4 trees, and this is a critical point with respect to scale and the ability to create a canopy of trees. If we have overhead wiring, that will limit the scale of trees on the parking strips, and thus make it even more important to get good size trees in those intermittent areas to help provide a canopy. But if the intermittent areas are too small to plant trees, then I'm inclined to not landscape them at all—it isn't worth the maintenance time and expense since there is so little impact with shrubs or groundcover.
- If we aren't going to underground the wiring, we're automatically limited in what we can do—we can't solve the problem with landscaping.
- Even with overhead wiring, we still want to plant trees as large as we can.
- Overhead wiring isn't just a bad choice in terms of impact on tree planting; it is bad design period!

- Sound Transit costs never included an amount high enough to underground the wires, but instead included \$3 million for overhead to overhead costs. City Council asked for an estimate of what it would cost to underground—City Light estimated about \$30 million. This is all about money. We are also coping with the cost of power right now, which doesn't help the situation. The MLK Corridor is an "electrical corridor" as well as a transportation corridor. There is lots of conduit in the street and limited space to put it all in.
- The civil team is assuming overhead wiring at this point, and the original \$3 million is still in Sound Transit's budget.
- Actually, Sound Transit has kept \$10 million in their budget, but the City can't afford the rest.
- Yes, even if with Sound Transit's \$10 million, we still have a \$20 million gap. The SHA projects do offer an opportunity to provide electrical service from the back (off MLK) and so that is one way to reduce the presence of overhead wiring along portions of MLK.
- We may also need to underground some of the wiring at McClellan to avoid conflict with other street wiring.
- Unfortunately the community has assumed a commitment to undergrounding, based on the images they have been shown.
- Given the number of issues up in the air, how can we have a legitimate discussion on trees? Until the overhead/underground decision is made, we are in limbo. We can resolve the "trees on platforms" issue with more staff coordination, but addressing the whole corridor is another story. We have an obligation to do more for the corridor—and more for the community—than we are.
- With the renewed interest in the South corridor moving forward first, the Sound Transit Board will be talking about this and making decisions soon.
- We need to make the ST Board and City Council aware of our concerns so that urban design is at least acknowledged as one of the factors in the decision.
- As the Sound Transit Board considers whether to move forward with Airport Link first, they will discuss what the project consists of; how it is defined, how far to build it, etc. In that discussion, there is an opportunity to elevate our issues.
- We are also looking at land use and zoning along the Corridor.
- But putting the onus on developers in Southeast Seattle goes against some of our other objectives too.
- The community will not be happy with overhead wiring!
- If Sound Transit is moving forward with civil design assuming overhead wiring, how expensive would it be to switch gears if we could address the funding issue?
- We have light poles and City Light is evaluating whether those could also be used for wires. But light pole spacing is closer than wire pole spacing typically is. The biggest cost may be in redesigning to fit the wiring in with other utilities underground.
- No matter what, we are still stuck with a four-foot wide planting strip on each side of the street, and because of that we need to explore fully the landscaping potential of other spaces within the right-of-way.
- Species selection does offer some options too.
- Another issue is that we still haven't determined who will maintain the landscaping, and that has an impact of what is planted and where it is planted. Sound Transit thinks the City should maintain the landscaping after the establishment period. The City is amenable to maintaining street trees, but not necessarily shrubs and groundcover and not in locations other than the planting strips.
- What about some elements being maintained by the community?
- I'm not in favor of it—it doesn't get maintained well under that scenario.
- Can we talk again about ballast or imbedded track—my concern is that imbedded tracks look like places to cross. Why not surface mount the tracks? Wouldn't this be cheaper?

- Not necessarily if you still have to pour concrete.
- When the wiring decisions are made, can we see a “real” landscape design?
- Maintenance has got to be addressed before design.
- We need to keep goals and vision for the MLK Corridor at the top of our list.
- I heard there are potential opportunities to move off the corridor a block or two with utilities, especially at station areas. True?
- There are a few locations, but not without a cost. This isn’t an easy solution.
- Is there a consistent advocate for trees on the teams who are working on this issue?
- There is no landscape architect on staff at Sound Transit.
- The LRRP recommended early on in the process that Sound Transit hire a landscape architect to coordinate these issues, similar to how they hired an art coordinator.
- It is never too late!
- How would a landscape architect change where the rail alignment is?
- It isn’t that he or she would change the alignment per se; it is that a landscape architect would be able to spot opportunities and influence alignment decisions from an urban design standpoint. The alignment, while generally fixed, is still moving slightly in response to final design. It is helpful to have someone looking at spatial relationships between infrastructure and the system.
- Until the Sound Transit staff and Board get direction to do otherwise, we’re in a “wait and see” mode.
- But we are working with the City on a site by site, block by block basis, so there still is opportunity to talk about working with a landscape architect in the future.
- There is a difference between working to preserve a four-foot strip and working to identify priorities for property takes. That is the benefit of early involvement of a landscape architect.
- This appears to be an extended interagency staff discussion on what the priorities are along the MLK Corridor. The Panel has given consistent direction for some time now about what the vision for the corridor ought to be. Now it appears that vision is in jeopardy. Frankly, this was less of a concern to me when I thought the designs were going to go on the shelf for a few years. But now that Airport Link could be built first, this is a whole new project in some respects. Coming together on this is more important now. This discussion is important, but perhaps isn’t happening in a way that is fruitful without the larger vision. This kind of detailed discussion isn’t necessarily what LRRP does!
- What is the extent of agreement or disagreement on landscaping and MLK Corridor vision? There may be more agreement than you realize—start there and then set the priorities.
- We’ve already provided a vision for the Corridor, but it doesn’t mesh with the realities of what staff is operating with. As a Southeast Seattle resident, I am not comfortable with the south end going forward at the level it is at now. Things are too up in the air.
- I would like some time to think about it because I don’t want the Panel to respond irresponsibly. Our long-term goal has always been to support the Sound Transit light rail system, and hopefully as one that has some urban design merit.
- It seems that while this is a staff discussion, the Panel needed to be made aware of the struggles that staff is having in adhering to the vision. Perhaps it is time to let upper management and decision-makers know of your concerns?
- Defining the alignment for the Sound Transit Board might be out of our ken.
- Not necessarily; you offer a special service and that is why the Panel is valuable. The Board certainly won’t base their decision on trees, but you can influence the viability and quality of the design. The Board is so focused on budget and schedule right now, that they don’t see the other issues. You can elevate those design issues again.
- Okay, then my recommendation is that IF this is built first, it had better look good and be maintainable. And we’d better ensure we’re not making decisions now regarding the design

that can't be corrected. The schedule will entail renegotiating with the community. What about the \$50 million Community Investment Fund?

- So far the community has maintained a "firewall" against using the CIF for undergrounding or other project-related costs. All along the community has maintained that the CIF is not to be used for picking up leftover project pieces.
- What is the most reasonable high road to take? This is a delicate situation. We don't want to alienate people along the way.
- Sound Transit definitely sees the Panel as value-added to the project.

No formal action was taken at the end of the discussion. Staff recapped important dates including the ST Board discussion on May 24th, and decision on June 14th regarding Airport Link. The Panel agreed to consider the issues further and take up the discussion again at the next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 6:15 pm.